

Ecclesiastes 5:1-7 | Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. To draw near to listen is better than to offer the sacrifice of fools, for they do not know that they are doing evil. <sup>2</sup> Be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven and you are on earth. Therefore let your words be few. <sup>3</sup> For a dream comes with much business, and a fool's voice with many words.

<sup>4</sup> When you vow a vow to God, do not delay paying it, for he has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you vow. <sup>5</sup> It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay. <sup>6</sup> Let not your mouth lead you into sin, and do not say before the messenger that it was a mistake. Why should God be angry at your voice and destroy the work of your hands? <sup>7</sup> For when dreams increase and words grow many, there is vanity; but God is the one you must fear.

## **Ecclesiastes 3:16-5:20 | Oppression & Loss**

Solomon understands this real life is where the argument takes place, and you know this too because it is where you're arguments falter. Yes I get that the world is vapor and it is a grievous place to endure. I understand that there can be joy found in it and I ought to receive that from the Lord. But it is one thing to see my riches unsatisfying, it is another to see the oppression of children. It is one thing to see this all terminates in death it is another to see the sufferings of the innocent. Eat drink and enjoy your toil, this is God's gift to man. Can that refrain hold up amidst the horrors of life? Or is it just the musing of a bored king?

In today's text we will move through several insights and vignettes so that you might see Solomon is not being avoidant in his conclusions. We need not be avoidant in our faith.

### **1. Wickedness & Death**

Ecclesiastes 3:16 | Moreover, I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, even there was wickedness, and in the place of righteousness, even there was wickedness.

Less popular of the 3:16s. It might seem a small observation but it is actually taking a harsh reality to its maximum. If in the space of justice there is wickedness then certainly there is no justice elsewhere. If in the place of righteousness there is wickedness then certainly there is no righteousness elsewhere. You seek justice in court and you find corruption. You seek justice in your family and find your father is absent. Your church is uninterested and cover the matte to save face. If it's lies all the way up? What hope is an appeal? It is strange considering what we believe about the radical nature of sin, that we still are surprised to discover wickedness in all corners of the world.

Ecclesiastes 3:17 | I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for there is a time for every matter and for every work.

But you must keep going up. Solomon says it to his own heart, there will be justice. There is a time right now in which the injustice persists. But there will be a time when the

righteous and the wicked are judged. Nobody will get away with it. There is a list. God knows precisely what happened, and precisely what ought to happen in response, and he will see to it that this is perfectly accomplished. Let us pray we might see it quickly. But again the timing is his. Again we must face death.

Ecclesiastes 3:18 | I said in my heart with regard to the children of man that God is testing them that they may see that they themselves are but beasts.

Solomon continues his insight and concludes that men are being tested, so that we might conclude we are but beasts. The reason is that just like the beasts die we likewise die. And who can observe and conclude that the spirit of man goes upward while the spirit of the beasts descend to the earth? Who can discern any difference? You see the judgement seems totally blind to any distinction of righteousness or wickedness. But we have already been assured by Solomon that God will judge rightly. The vapor is in this context is a limit. The hubris of man thinks his wickedness will go unchecked. It will not.

## 2. Various Oppressions

Ecclesiastes 4:1 | Again I saw all the oppressions that are done under the sun. And behold, the tears of the oppressed, and they had no one to comfort them! On the side of their oppressors there was power, and there was no one to comfort them.

Now Solomon considers the plight of the oppressed. Those filled with tears and no one to comfort them. And of course by the very nature of oppression it is committed by those with power against those who have none. What can the child say to the abusive parent? Who can comfort them? Their tears cry out but does anyone see? Solomon concludes the dead are better off. But who is better than the dead is the one who has never been born. Job laments the day of his birth and he's not unreasonable to do so. But those under oppressors can be no worse off than those oppressed by themselves.

Ecclesiastes 4:4-6 | Then I saw that all toil and all skill in work come from a man's envy of his neighbor. This also is vanity and a striving after wind.  
<sup>5</sup> The fool folds his hands and eats his own flesh. <sup>6</sup> Better is a handful of quietness than two hands full of toil and a striving after wind.

Envy is the fuel behind our skill and toil. But what does this amount to? It can't be avoided it is since the beginning. Since Cain hated Able. Since scar hated Mufasa. Look at the driven man, he doesn't know why he's climbing the ladder that was dangled in front of him. But no better is the lazy one! Who folds his hands and then devours himself. He withers away. He might recognize all the striving as envy but he vanishes, even his own self-respect he consumes. Where does this handful of quietness come from that? It is twice as good as toil and striving after wind.

Ecclesiastes 4:8 | one person who has no other, either son or brother, yet there is no end to all his toil, and his eyes are never satisfied with riches, so that he never asks, “For whom am I toiling and depriving myself of pleasure?” This also is vanity and an unhappy business.

There is another person you must know about. The one who has no one to work for and yet he ceaselessly works and his eyes are never satisfied. He never even asks what for! This is an unhappy business. As unhappy as the envious as unhappy as the sluggard is the slave of habit. Chasing vapor. There is something better.

Ecclesiastes 4:9-10 | Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. <sup>10</sup> For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up!

There is something out of this blight which breaks forth as better. Two are better than one. It is still not good for the man to be alone. He sees that there is some resiliency in our relationships. There is something which stands against the vapor in our connections. Our relationships are like a clue to the way out. Here is another important story. So important for you to know.

Ecclesiastes 4:13-14 | Better was a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king who no longer knew how to take advice. <sup>14</sup> For he went from prison to the throne, though in his own kingdom he had been born poor.

The old king who could no longer take advice is worse than the poor and wise youth. Age is no guarantee of wisdom, it can produce hardness. But the wise youth will ascend to the throne of the old man.

Ecclesiastes 4:16 | There was no end of all the people, all of whom he led. Yet those who come later will not rejoice in him. Surely this also is vanity and a striving after wind.

But the cycle is not broken. The one who takes the throne from the old man will one day become familiar. This familiarity will likewise breed contempt. Do not be surprised when you see this story. You won't even be able to remember how you first felt about the king.

### **3. Approaching God**

Ecclesiastes 5:1-2 | Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. To draw near to listen is better than to offer the sacrifice of fools, for they do not know that they are doing evil. <sup>2</sup> Be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven and you are on earth. Therefore let your words be few.

Lest you think this vanity is only available to the irreligious life, it is not. When we approach the Lord in worship we must approach him with reverence and honor. It is better

to listen and hear God then to foolishly present our case before him. God is in heaven and we are on earth. Therefore our words should be few before him.

We must approach God with fear. And this is the place where we practice this most, here in church. This is why we seek to worship him and make an offering before him with our songs. We are called not to be entertained, we are not called to be meeting our own preferences. This is very difficult for the American church with its consumer orientation to grasp but that is simply not what we are doing here. We are not here to be satisfied. Come before the Lord in fear of him. Honor him. This is the place where our hope in him might be restored. This whole section echoes Psalm 73. In which a man surveys the injustice of the world. He envies the prosperity of the wicked and laments his own commitment to the Lord which seems to profit him nothing.

Psalm 73:16-17 | But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task, <sup>17</sup> until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end.

Here in the sanctuary of God he discerns the hope of the judgement of the Lord. There will be justice. The vignettes return.

Ecclesiastes 5:8 | If you see in a province the oppression of the poor and the violation of justice and righteousness, do not be amazed at the matter, for the high official is watched by a higher, and there are yet higher ones over them.

The fool looks at the oppression of bureaucracy and is surprised. In fact he'll keep perpetually hunting for the center. You'll be able to tell a story. It's really there.

Ecclesiastes 5:18-20 | Behold, what I have seen to be good and fitting is to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of his life that God has given him, for this is his lot. <sup>19</sup> Everyone also to whom God has given wealth and possessions and power to enjoy them, and to accept his lot and rejoice in his toil—this is the gift of God. <sup>20</sup> For he will not much remember the days of his life because God keeps him occupied with joy in his heart.

This might seem like a mere hymn to moderation. But once again this is to miss the point. It is that same conclusion which here in the middle of an exploration of the sufferings of life breaks through. The centerpiece is God. Eat and drink and find enjoyment because it is from the hand of God. The toil is from God, the prosperity is from God. The one who sees it all as from the hand of God will see life pass quickly, like a good meal with friends.

Philippians 4:12-13 | I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. <sup>13</sup> I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

